

4 Men on Abuse at Ireland's Catholic Schools: 'I Was Destroyed by It'

After decades of silence, dozens of older men are talking about the sexual abuse they suffered at schools run by religious orders. We spoke to four of them.



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Reporting from Dublin

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They came forward in small groups at first. And then they spoke out in waves.

Over the past two years, dozens of people, mostly men in their 50s and 60s, have reported being sexually abused at schools run by Catholic orders in Ireland.

Their accounts only hint at the magnitude of a national scandal, experts say. In September, a preliminary government inquiry identified almost 2,400 allegations of sexual abuse in religious schools between the 1960s and the 1990s, and 884 alleged abusers. Norma Foley, Ireland's minister for education, said the scale of abuse was "truly shocking," and has ordered a full government investigation.

While Ireland has long grappled with the legacy of abuse within Catholic church institutions, the latest revelations shed light on how dozens of schools allegedly harbored serial abusers for decades.

The fight for accountability has been led by a cohort of older men who are challenging taboos around sexual abuse, masculinity and shame.

"Their numbers are so big, and the ripple effect of harm must bring some impact on broader Irish society," said Tim Chapman, an academic and a practitioner of "restorative justice," a process that helps people harmed by a crime to communicate with those responsible and to find some resolution.



School mementoes belonging to John Coulter, who is part of a survivors' group demanding answers about the abuse they suffered. Paulo Nunes dos Santos for The New York Times



Faded school yearbooks belonging to Mark Vincent Healy, who was abused at St. Mary's College, Dublin, between 1969 and 1973. Paulo Nunes dos Santos for The New York Times

The reckoning began in 2021 when several former students from two private boys' schools, Willow Park School and Blackrock College, began discussing their experiences of abuse in a Facebook alumni group. The following year, Ireland's national broadcaster RTÉ aired a radio documentary called "Blackrock Boys" that featured the harrowing testimony of two brothers abused for years at the college.

Both Willow Park and Blackrock are run by a Roman Catholic order called the Spiritans. In November 2022, the leader of the Spiritans then, Father Martin Kelly, issued a formal apology to the victims at Blackrock, in which he said, "What was done to you as innocent children was cruel and indefensible."

Since then, accounts have poured in from alumni of schools run by other Catholic orders in Ireland.

Mr. Chapman was first contacted by Blackrock survivors in 2021 and then was hired by the Spiritans to facilitate dialogue between the religious order and the survivors and victims of abuse. "As I often put it to these men, you can stand up for the child inside you," he said. "Now, they can tell their story."

John Coulter, 63



“In our time alone, there are 10 people that we now know were molesting, abusing, raping boys,” John Coulter said of his school experience. Paulo Nunes dos Santos for The New York Times

John Coulter attended Willow Park School and Blackrock College in the late 1960s and early 1970s. He has visceral memories of two priests, he said: one who molested students as he taught music, and another, a math teacher, who leaned students over the desks in class and rubbed himself on them. Mr. Coulter still remembers the smell of one man and the way spit would cling to the corners of his mouth.

Mr. Coulter was in the alumni Facebook group in 2021, when friends began recounting their experiences of abuse. “In our time alone, there are 10 people that we now know were molesting, abusing, raping boys,” he said.

As the scale of abuse became clear, the men decided they wanted to act. They established a nonprofit advocacy group, Restore Together, to collectively demand accountability. As a result, the Spiritans are now funding counseling for survivors and are currently formalizing a financial reparations program.

“You get to your 60s or late 50s and maybe you’ve got a little bit more capacity for dealing with this,” Mr. Coulter said.

Corry McMahon, 65



Corry McMahon said he was abused when he was just 12. Paulo Nunes dos Santos for The New York Times

Corry McMahon was on the train between Dublin and its affluent southern suburbs when he saw an email with the Spiritans’ official apology to victims. He wept.

The setting was particularly meaningful: It was the same train route, hugging the scenic coast of Dublin Bay, that he used to take as a child heading to Willow Park and then Blackrock College, which share a campus. “I think about it more on this train,” he said, speaking of the abuse he and his classmates endured.

He said he was abused at 12 by two priests and a lay teacher. As a member of Restore Together, he and three classmates held a news conference in November 2022 to encourage others to come forward, helping break the taboo around speaking out.

“Picture a 12-year-old child that you know. That was the shape of us,” he said then, his voice breaking.

While he welcomes the government’s pledge to investigate, he worries that the full inquiry will be too slow. “There are guys that we know that need things to be done now,” he said. “This is the time to deal with it, not in 10 years when a number of them are dead.”

Ireland’s Department of Education said in a statement that it was “keenly aware of the importance of immediate action on the issue of historical sexual abuse to survivors,” and that it would establish the terms of its inquiry “in the shortest possible time frame.”

Michael O’Keeffe, 65



“We just felt we didn’t have the power to stand up to these people,” said Michael O’Keeffe, who said he was abused at a school run by the Rosminians Catholic order. Paulo Nunes dos Santos for The New York Times

Michael O’Keeffe, who was born with a visual impairment, was 8 years old when he was sent to St. Joseph’s School for the Visually Impaired in Dublin. At the time, the residential school was run by the Rosminians Catholic religious order.

He says he endured sexual and physical violence there, including being beaten by one cleric, Louis Summerling, who has since died but who was the subject of previous sexual abuse allegations by another former student.

Mr. O’Keeffe said he was forced to remove his trousers and bend over the cleric’s knee while he was beaten with a hairbrush.

“I remember the shame and humiliation experienced as a young boy, possibly aged only 11, from this so-called man of God,” he said, adding: “We just felt we didn’t have the power to stand up to these people.”

He reported the violence to the police 15 years ago, he said, but an investigation went nowhere.

The Association of Leaders of Missionaries and Religious of Ireland, or AMRI, which oversees the work of the Rosminians in Ireland, as well as dozens of other Catholic religious orders, said in a statement it was “deeply sorry” for the abuse in religious-run schools.

Mr. O’Keeffe, a retired assistant professor who used to teach at Dublin City University, decided to share his story with The Irish Times after the abuse at Blackrock made national headlines and the government’s preliminary inquiry was released.

“In Ireland, we just didn’t talk about these things,” he said. “In some ways, we didn’t have the language to do it until now. So this is giving people permission.”

Mark Vincent Healy, 64



“What isn’t always told is how your life is entirely ripped apart,” said Mark Vincent Healy, who attended St. Mary’s College, run by the Spiritans. Paulo Nunes dos Santos for The New York Times

Mark Vincent Healy attended St. Mary’s College in Dublin, also run by the Spiritans. Between 1969, when he was 9, and 1973, he says he was sexually abused by two priests.

“I felt simply that I was destroyed by it, by the reality of my childhood,” he said.

He had a breakdown as an adult before becoming an advocate for victims. While there is often a focus on the crimes that were committed, “what isn’t always told is how your life is entirely ripped apart,” Mr. Healy said. “Economically, socially — all of your relationships are impacted.”

Mr. Healy is one of the few victims to succeed with a criminal case against one of the priests, Henry Maloney. Mr. Maloney, who has since died, pleaded guilty in 2009 to abusing Mr. Healy and another boy when they were pupils at St. Mary's College.

Mr. Healy wants more than a government inquiry, including more robust mental health support for survivors. "If you don't learn those lessons of the past, you are certainly not protecting the children of the present," he said.

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